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SUBJECT: CODEL NELSON-LOTT MEETS WITH FM LAVROV

¶1. (SBU) Summary: U.S.-Russian Senate-Federation Council Interparliamentary Working Group Co-Chairs Senator Ben Nelson and Senator Trent Lott, accompanied by Senators Evan Bayh, Judd Gregg, and Richard Burr, met May 29 with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to discuss current bilateral and multilateral issues. Lavrov highlighted cooperative elements in the bilateral relationship -- nonproliferation, counterterrorism, and civilian nuclear energy -- but outlined strong differences on missile defense, Kosovo, and CFE. Lavrov cautioned against "megaphone" diplomacy in the run-up to elections in both countries. End Summary.

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U.S.-Russian Relations  
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¶3. (SBU) Senator Nelson underlined that the U.S. wanted a strong bilateral partnership with Russia. FM Lavrov stressed the role that bilateral relations had on global stability and noted mutual interests in tackling new threats. Lavrov said Presidents Bush and Putin had established a high level of trust and there were many areas where the U.S. and Russia cooperated effectively, including on nuclear nonproliferation, the development of civilian nuclear power, and counterterrorism. Productive efforts in these areas did not garner the same attention that differences did, but neither side should lose sight of the benefits of a healthy relationship.

¶4. (SBU) At the same time, Lavrov added, neither side could honestly state they were satisfied with the current state of bilateral ties. Both countries should avoid holding the relationship hostage to electoral cycles. Both needed to pay careful attention to questions of tone and to avoid public comments that added fuel to disagreements. Russia was ready for "sincere" discussions, but "megaphone" diplomacy and scoring points in the press detracted from trying to find common solutions. Lavrov said we have enough serious problems to address without adding to our burdens. On North Korea, the Middle East, and Iran, we were working well together, while on Kosovo, missile defense and CFE, we disagreed in principle on the correct approach or we had sharply different views of the situation. On frozen conflicts, Russia believed the West too often aimed at making immediate gains to the detriment of long-term solutions.

¶5. (SBU) Responding to Senator Lott's call for finding areas where the U.S. and Russia could work together, Lavrov said that there was much productive work that drew little media attention. In a fast-changing, increasingly multipolar world dominated by Asia's rise, the U.S. and Russia should be partners across the board, but partnership would require respect for each state's key interests and the maintenance of a strategic balance.

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Missile Defense  
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¶16. (SBU) Acknowledging Russian complaints about U.S. plans to place MD sites in Poland and the Czech Republic, Senator Nelson pressed Lavrov on the implications of Russian objections to the planned deployments. Lavrov responded by challenging the validity of the threats that the U.S. cited in justifying MD. On DPRK, Lavrov asserted that the resolution of the Korean nuclear issue was on the right track and that the Six Party Talks were likely to lead to a resolution that would allow the nuclear arms file to be closed. At the same time, the U.S. was already deploying interceptors to address this threat. On Iran, Russia had concluded that Tehran was not likely to be capable of launching an attack on Europe, much less the U.S., for many years, perhaps decades. Iran was not close to building a nuclear warhead and lacked the capability of building a long range ballistic missile capable of hitting Europe.

¶17. (SBU) Lavrov also challenged the U.S. rationale for placing the MD interceptors in Poland, arguing that putting them in southern Europe made more sense if they were really designed to address an Iranian threat. The interceptors in Poland could be replaced with ballistic missiles with MIRV'ed warheads in silos that could accommodate more than one missile. Moscow saw this possible development as part of U.S. efforts to develop a global MD system tying together interceptor bases in Alaska, radar sites in the UK, Greenland and the Pacific, and fleet-based maritime MD systems in the Mediterranean. From the Russian General Staff's perspective, this looked like a system that surrounded Russia (and China as well). Intentions could change, and the U.S. was busy creating facts on the ground that were creating a perception that it could be seeking a disarming, first strike capability. The Russian leadership had an obligation to take precautions to prevent a shift in the strategic balance that

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underpinned Russian security and global stability.

¶18. (SBU) Lavrov stressed that in the absence of a credible threat from Iran for many years, Russia had serious concerns about why the U.S. was seeking to put into place an MD system now in Europe. Russia, not Iran, would be the state most threatened by such a system. The U.S. had been sending mixed signals on MD for several years. Early on during the Bush Administration, the U.S. had offered to work together with Russia on technology, but that interest waned. If the U.S. were really interested in MD cooperation, it would first work with Russia to develop a joint threat analysis. The U.S. and Russia "should start from scratch," and not present Russia with a fait accompli.

¶19. (SBU) Senator Lott said he was surprised that Moscow had judged that the MD system was designed to threaten Russia and said that such misperceptions underlined the need for closer cooperation. We need to identify disagreements and find room for cooperation. Senator Bayh noted that there were differences within the USG on MD plans, but he stressed there was absolutely no intention on the part of the U.S. to threaten the U.S.-Russia strategic balance. MD plans were to address a threat from Iran. If there were only a 10 percent chance that Tehran would be able to develop the capacity to launch a nuclear-armed missile at Europe or the U.S., then the U.S. needed to do something to address that threat.

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Iran  
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¶10. (SBU) Turning to Iran, Lavrov provided the MFA's assessment of the Iranian nuclear program. Moscow judged that Iran was committed to developing a complete nuclear fuel cycle, but stressed there was no proof that Tehran had enriched uranium to weapons grade or had an intention to do so in the immediate future. Lavrov acknowledged that the IAEA was seeking clarification from Tehran on documentation that contained schematics for a nuclear warhead and that Iran had so far refused to comply. Russia was seriously concerned

about the direction of Iran's program; this had prompted Russia to work with the P-5 Plus One and in the UN Security Council to develop a step-by-step approach to address Iran's program.

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Kosovo

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¶11. (SBU) Senator Lott raised the issue of Kosovo's status, noting Lavrov's opening comment that the U.S. and Russia differed not only on tactics, but on ultimate goals. Lott emphasized that Kosovo's independence had to be handled carefully and with appropriate safeguards for minority rights. Lavrov asked rhetorically, "why the rush?" Lavrov argued that everyone knew that Serbia would pursue membership in the EU and NATO and would need to resolve the Kosovo problem as part of those processes. In the meantime, Kosovo had de facto independence. Lavrov said that Serbia's European future would make it easier to swallow its "national humiliation." Threats of violence on the part of Kosovars could not justify independence; KFOR had been established and empowered to handle threats to civil order.

¶12. (SBU) Lavrov said Russia advocated a more cautious approach that would build consensus. Whether the U.S. and Europe accepted it or not, the "imposition" of a settlement on Serbia would create a precedent that many other national groups would pursue. Russia would face serious pressures to recognize and protect Abkhazians and South Ossetians if Kosovo gained its independence and this would create further turmoil in Russia's North Caucasus. The current process in the UN Security Council was putting Russia into "an impossible position" of accepting Kosovar independence based on the principle of self-determination while denying independence to others who made the same arguments. Senator Lott noted that the subject of Kosovo had been raised during a May 29 phone call between Presidents Bush and Putin. He stressed that the Ahtisaari process had been deliberate.

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Counterterrorism

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¶13. (SBU) Senator Burr emphasized the importance of ongoing counterterrorism cooperation between the U.S. and Russia. He noted and Lavrov agreed that changing demographic patterns in the U.S., Russia and Europe would complicate how we handle counterterrorism problems.

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Jackson-Vanik

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¶14. (SBU) Lavrov raised repeal of Jackson-Vanik legislation, noting that once Russia acceded to WTO, Moscow would be entitled to deny to U.S. firms the benefits that the U.S. had negotiated with Russia if the legislation was not repealed. Senator Gregg touched on the history surrounding attempts to repeal the statute; Lavrov pointed out that Jackson-Vanik was no longer a "legacy" issue, but could have real world effects.

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Nuclear and Post-START

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¶15. (SBU) Lavrov highlighted productive bilateral discussions on nonproliferation and developing civilian nuclear energy through the Presidential Initiative. Russia and the U.S. needed to work together to strengthen the international legal framework for nonproliferation without reopening the Nonproliferation Treaty. The two countries also needed to look at a follow-up to the START Treaty and discuss what mechanisms were realistic. Lavrov noted that this year's commemoration of the 200th anniversary of bilateral ties gave us an opportunity to take stock of where the relationship was headed.

¶16. (U) CODEL Nelson-Lott has cleared this message.  
BURNS